Facilitating learner autonomy in university English classes: Student-led discussions

Fern SAKAMOTO

Abstract

Autonomous learning has long been recognised as beneficial for language learners, but some question its suitability in Japan where teachers have traditionally been seen as responsible for managing student-learning. The Japanese government has recognised the need to cultivate foreign language learners who are independent and able to think critically, but has provided little guidance to teachers about how to foster those qualities in students. The author sought to incorporate increased student autonomy into an existing university English class syllabus. Students prepared and led a peer-discussion on a topic of their own choice. Feedback after the discussions showed that many of the students were not satisfied with their personal performances and wanted more explicit guidance from the teacher, but ultimately enjoyed the activity and thought that it was beneficial. All students were able to exercise autonomy and complete the activity. Although autonomy in a Japanese classroom may find its expression in a different way to Western ideas of autonomy, it is nonetheless an appropriate and attainable goal.

1 Introduction

Autonomous learning has been shown to have positive effects for language learners, enabling them to tailor how, what, and at what speed they learn, as well as increasing motivation, all of which lead to more effective learning (Dickinson, 1995; Holec, 1981; Little, 2007). This suggests that language teachers should be

aiming to instil autonomous learning practices in students. Seeking to incorporate increased student autonomy into an existing university English class syllabus, the author developed an in-class student-led discussion activity. In this paper, I will first look at the benefits of autonomous learning for language learners and its suitability in the Japanese context, before introducing the student-led discussion task and reflecting on student responses to the activity.

2 Autonomy in language learning

Learner autonomy is the ability to take charge of our own learning. Holec (1981) explained that this comprises first accepting responsibility for our own learning, and then taking deliberate action to further it. Included in learner autonomy then are both an affective dimension related to attitudes and motivation, and a strategic dimension including metacognitive skills to further the learning process. Benson (2001) identified three key parts of learner autonomy, comprising learning management, cognitive processes, and learning content. Autonomy is not simply about learning information independently then, it also requires learners to actively consider and make decisions about the content they wish to learn.

Language learning today is a complex business. Globalisation has impacted on the way that language learning takes place, giving rise to a wider range of learning purposes and situations than ever before. The development of transportation and communication technologies means that individuals now have contact with people from a wide range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Chen, 2005). At the same time, modern communication technologies have created increased opportunities for intercultural interaction and language practice (Kramsch & Thorne, 2002) and the internet offers a variety of language learning tools that anyone with an internet connection can access. Learning a language is no longer restricted to the classroom and may not even require a teacher. Given the complexity of resources, learning environments, and communication opportunities available to language learners today, autonomy, both as a communicator and a learner, has become a necessity (Littlewood, 1999).

3 The Japanese EFL context

Differences in Asian and Western learning styles are often said to find their roots in the Confucian and Socratic philosophies, with autonomous learning styles considered the domain of Western education systems (Sakai & Takagi, 2009). Good learners in Japan have traditionally been those who are quiet, passive, and obedient (Nozaki, 1993), with teachers responsible for deciding what and how learning takes place, and for supplying students with information to memorise. Students expect their teachers to take the lead in education. A 2008 survey of Japanese, Taiwanese, and Korean university students, showed that most of the students felt that it was natural for teachers to control learning (Sakai, Chu, Takagi & Lee, 2008).

Japan's exam-oriented culture may be one reason for the dependence on teachers. Standardised tests such as the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) have long been an important measure of success for English-language learners in Japan, with good learners being those who score highly on such tests, rather than those who successfully use English for more communicative purposes (Sakai & Takagi, 2009). Entrance to prestigious universities is largely decided on the basis of the "Centre Shiken", a nationwide standardised test used to grade students applying to public and private universities in Japan. The English section of the examination tests students on listening and reading skills, but does not require any English output. These types of tests do require students to take some degree of responsibility in their own learning, as independent study is an important predictor of success (STEP, 2006 in Sakai & Takagi, 2009). However, Ohno, Nakamura, Sagara and Sakai (2008) showed that students who performed well on tests tended to be obedient to their teachers and follow instructions about how to study. These students expected teachers to take responsibility for class management. Learners who wanted to study using their own preferred methods or materials were less successful. This raises the question of whether autonomy, which encourages not only independent acquisition of information but also making decisions related to learning content, is in fact a worthwhile goal for Japanese students.

Some scholars hold that the "Western" idea of autonomy in fact has no place in the Japanese education system and is inappropriate for Japanese learners (Wagner,

2013), but research has shown that Japanese learners do have a capacity and indeed a desire for autonomy (e.g., Littlewood, 1999; Holden & Usuki, 1999; Sakai, Chu, Takagi & Lee, 2008). Sakai and Takagi (2009) suggested that rather than the concept of autonomy itself, it is the use of western frameworks for autonomy in the Japanese context that is problematic. In other words, though their expressions of autonomy may not look the same as those of western students, Japanese students are nonetheless able to develop learner autonomy.

Added to this is the argument that learner autonomy has become increasingly necessary for all cultures, as globalisation imposes on all learners the necessity of learning without depending on teachers (Littlewood, 1999). In recent years, the Japanese government has recognised the need to teach more communicative English and to foster critical thinking and independence in students. In 2020, the government will implement a nationwide reform of the Centre Shiken that reflects this move to more active learning (McCrostie, 2017). Details of the new test are yet to be finalised, but McCrostie (2017) explained that recent government statements suggest revisions to the English test, and increased coordination with private-sector English testing companies, to incorporate assessment of thinking and expression skills. This shift of emphasis in the all-important Centre Shiken may well bring about a significant change in the focus and style of language education in Japan. As of yet though, learner autonomy is rarely mentioned in pedagogic dialogue in Japan, and little guidance has been provided to instructors in how to help Japanese learners adopt the learning and thinking styles necessary to become critical thinkers and users of language.

4 Teaching autonomy

There is a tendency to associate autonomous learning with independent study, often using computer-based learning systems (Iimuro & Berger, 2010; Schmenk, 2005; Wagner, 2013). This approach can be useful, but if the ability to use language effectively for communicative purposes is the goal of language learning, then it is important not to overlook the social aspect of language use. Lamb (2017) stated that "successful language learners are not simply passive recipients of knowledge" (p. 230). Autonomy is not restricted to independent or out-of-class activity. Indeed, in-class training is necessary if learners are to develop the

motivation and responsibility to effectively utilise self-access tools to further their own learning (Lee, 1998).

Benson (2001) claimed that "any practice that encourages and enables learners to take greater control of any aspect of their learning can be considered a means of promoting autonomy" (p. 109). He identified five approaches to the development of autonomy by teachers: (a) resource-based, (b) technology-based, (c) learner-based, (d) classroom-based, and (e) teacher-based approaches. Benson explained that these approaches are not distinct practices, but are interdependent. The researcher drew on all five of Benson's approaches to design a classroom-based student-led discussion activity. For this activity, students first decided their own discussion topics and located relevant online information sources. They then followed guidelines developed by the instructor to prepare a handout and lead their classmates in a class discussion activity. After completion of the activity, students were requested to provide feedback via an online survey to allow the researcher some insight into their responses to the activity.

5 Method

5.1 Participants

The participants were 40 Japanese students (13 males, 27 females) enrolled in a compulsory communicative English course offered by the Department of British and American Studies at a private Japanese university. The course was designed to facilitate development of listening and discussion skills. I saw students three times a week, for 45 minutes each time. The remaining 45 minutes of each 90-minute session were devoted to listening exercises under the guidance of a different instructor.

5.2 Procedure

The student-led discussion activity required students to prepare and lead a 20-minute group discussion related to topics that had been covered in class. The activity was designed to develop critical thinking, knowledge about global issues, and discussion skills. It was also expected to help students acquire expressions and vocabulary related to the class themes. I hoped that allowing the students freedom in terms of the theme, focus, and progress of their discussions would increase

their autonomy, with benefits for motivation and learning.

In earlier classes, students had carried out regular discussion activities related to the themes of marriage, family and cultural groups. For these discussions, students were provided with a data source (e.g., a short newspaper article or video), which they were expected to read or watch at home, and several questions to answer. In class, they divided into pairs or small groups and used the questions as a springboard into a discussion on the themes. The student-led discussions followed a similar idea, but required student-pairs to prepare and lead the discussions themselves, taking on the facilitator role usually assumed by the teacher. Students were assigned partners and together completed these steps to prepare for the activity:

1. Listened to an explanation by the instructor and read a handout (Appendix 1) explaining the framework for their preparations.
2. Decided on a topic related to the course themes.
3. Found an authentic online text providing background information related to the topic and provided the instructor with the website link.
4. Prepared a handout to guide their classmates in discussion, including key words from the article and discussion questions. Students submitted these handouts to the instructor for proof-reading and photocopying.
5. Participated in a 20-minute demonstration discussion led by the instructor.
6. Prepared for discussions led by their peers by watching or reading the related texts. (Students were provided with a discussion schedule including websites to look at for each class.)

In class, students divided into two groups of ten members each. The two leaders distributed handouts to the remaining eight members of their groups and led their classmates in a 20-minute discussion. The teacher observed but did not contribute to discussions. After 20 minutes, the leaders changed and a second discussion ensued.

After leading their discussion, students were asked to provide written feedback about the activity via an online survey (Appendix 2). The survey was assigned as homework with both questions and answers all in English. In order to check homework completion, student responses were not anonymous. Thirty-five (out of 40) students completed the survey, which comprised four open-ended questions. The first two questions were designed to encourage students to reflect

on their personal preparation and performance, and will not be discussed here. Survey questions 3 and 4 form the basis of the results section below.

6 Results

6.1 Teacher and student observations

All student-pairs successfully chose a topic, found an appropriate online resource, prepared a handout and led their classmates in a 20-minute discussion. Discussions ranged from lively to somewhat stilted but all student facilitators were able to encourage most of their peers to contribute to the discussion.

Student comments on their discussions corresponded to observations made by the teacher. Many of the leaders had difficulty managing the allotted 20 minutes, with most surprised to find themselves running out of time. Others said that they were flustered when their discussion questions were met with questioning looks, or with answers that they had not expected. Discussion leaders on the first day had not prepared to direct their peers in where to sit or how to discuss the questions. Students who facilitated on later days learned from watching their classmates and made decisions regarding seating arrangements and organisation of the discussion ahead of time. Some chose to have their peers discuss in pairs and then report on their conversations, and others preferred a roundtable discussion involving the entire group.

6.2 Student feedback

Teacher guidance

In response to question three, asking about the amount of teacher-guidance for the activity, 16 students felt they needed more guidance, 14 said that the guidance provided was sufficient, and 5 didn't clearly answer one way or the other. Five students responded with explicit improvements that they would benefit from: 3 students wanted to watch a video recording of a model discussion, and 2 students wanted a formal lecture on how to lead a discussion. Most students who wanted more guidance though, were vague about what nature that guidance should take. Three examples of student comments are included below.

Yes, I did [feel that I needed more guidance]. *I didn't know the way to lead the*

discussion, so I want more information. For example, watching model video that shows how the discussion is going beforehand.

I don't have any knowledge of leading a discussion. I saw the demonstration in advance but I couldn't understand how I should do that somehow. I would like to get more specific knowledge of it.

No, [we didn't need more guidance] *because it was good to organize and I think students have to have the responsibility and organize whatever we want.*

One student demonstrated an understand of her growth through the activity, explaining that although initially she didn't have the necessary skills to lead a discussion, they were developed through the activity.

If I had the guidance of it, I could do more smoothly than this discussion. However, I learned the way of discussion from this discussion. So I think this discussion was guidance of it.

Student comments

Question four invited students to comment freely on the discussion activity. Four frequent themes emerged from student responses: 12 students commented that they enjoyed leading and or participating in discussions, 12 said that they thought it was useful for them, 10 said they found it challenging, and 8 said that it was their first time experiencing this type of activity.

The type of discussion, all of things were prepared by classmates was the first time for me. I felt nervous a little, but it was fun.

This kind of class was new to me, so I felt difficulties to express my opinion. But it was an effective training and I would like to improve the ability.

I want to practice this task more. I think this is the necessary skill for us.

Other students commented that through this activity they

- realized the importance of facilitation for effective discussion;
- better understood their own strengths and weaknesses;
- came to appreciate the importance of students taking an active approach rather than relying on the teacher to lead them; and
- were able to hear opinions on topics that were interesting to them.

7 Discussion

The two most frequent student comments on the discussion activity were that it was enjoyable and beneficial, but almost half of the students wanted more explicit instruction in how to lead a discussion. While students were provided with some scaffolding in the form of written preparation guidelines (Appendix 1) and a teacher-led demonstration of the task, many students felt unprepared for the reality of leading a discussion. This could be attributed to the fact that, as several students explicitly stated, taking the lead in this way was a new experience. Classrooms in Japan tend to be teacher-focused, and students expect the teacher to control the class. Abruptly thrusting the students into a "teacher" role goes against what they are conditioned to. Another reason may be a lack of confidence. Students who are used to a teacher making decisions on what to learn and how to do so may struggle to complete this kind of task where there are no tidy "right" or "wrong" ways to go about it. These students want the teacher to show them the right way to lead the discussion before undertaking the facilitator role themselves.

Fourteen students, however, did not feel that they needed more guidance, perhaps feeling, as one student explained, that the process of preparing and leading allowed them to discover and develop the skills that they needed. This finding begs the question of whether it is better to provide more detailed guidance, or not. There is something to be said for throwing the students in at the deep end – some were surprised at their own abilities, and the process of discovery and development is surely more meaningful than passively receiving one-sided information about how to lead a discussion. It is however important to find a balance between giving students enough scope and encouragement to come up with their own ideas, and providing sufficient support to allow learners to develop autonomy while building their confidence as foreign language speakers.

Rather than providing too much explicit guidance related to facilitation (e.g., lectures on "how to lead a discussion"), it may be useful to provide key questions to encourage students to think about details they perhaps would not otherwise consider (e.g., "How will you ask your classmates to sit?", "What will you do if they don't understand your questions?", and "What will you do if your classmates have not read the article?").

Ultimately, the learners were able to demonstrate autonomy in the classroom, and many felt they benefitted from doing so, suggesting that learner autonomy is an appropriate goal for language classrooms in Japan. Providing more scaffolding in the preparation stages could be beneficial in allowing students to develop autonomy at their own pace.

8 Conclusion

Autonomous learning has long been recognised as beneficial in the acquisition of a foreign language, but it is now more important than ever. Technological advancements have led to the development of a wide variety of online learning tools and opportunities for language-use, and globalisation has raised the stakes for English language learners, with the ability to communicate effectively in English becoming an important, some would say necessary, skill to possess. In Japan, the government has recognised the need to cultivate foreign-language speakers who are not only linguistically capable, but are also independent and able to think critically.

The author here introduced an activity to promote learner autonomy within an existing university language course syllabus. The student-led discussion activity gave students control over the topics and information sources they talked about in class, as well as the focus and management of their group discussions. In taking control of aspects of their in-class activities, students exercised learner autonomy. Many of the students found the activity challenging and wanted more explicit guidance from the teacher, but most students ultimately enjoyed the activity and perceived it as beneficial. More comprehensive scaffolding to help students through the process of preparing and facilitating discussions could be useful in encouraging students to develop autonomy at their own pace, but needs to be designed in such a way as to support students without limiting their creativity.

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Appendix 1. Student Handout

Student-led Discussions

So far, the majority of discussions have been teacher-led, or the topic has been chosen by the teacher. Now it is time to learn how to moderate a discussion yourselves. You will work in pairs to prepare and lead a short class discussion.

1. Choose an issue

This should connect somehow with one of the topics we have covered so far (Marriage, Family & the Home; Belonging to a Group). Choose a topic that you think is controversial or worth discussing. We are looking for something that gets us thinking and talking on a meaningful and challenging level.

2. Prepare some information

This is to make sure we have enough background information about your topic for genuine discussion to be possible. Choose a brief video (YouTube is fine), a newspaper story, or some other online information source. Email the URL for your source to your teacher. Your classmates will read/watch the material before your discussion class.

3. Prepare a handout

This should include vocabulary and discussion questions. Please email your handout to your teacher the day before your discussion class. I will put together a schedule of discussion groups and leaders and make copies of the handouts for class.

4. Lead the class

The teacher will divide the class into two groups, then you will be in charge! One pair will lead a group of about 8 students in a 20-minute discussion. You should not be doing all the thinking or talking – you are just there to facilitate meaningful discussion. When the discussion is finished, a new pair will lead a discussion on the next topic.

Appendix 2. Survey Questions

1. What went the way you expected with your discussion-leading? What didn't go the way you expected?
2. Did you feel well-prepared to lead the discussion? How could you have prepared better?
3. Did you feel that you needed more guidance to help you prepare for the discussion? Is there any way this activity could be improved?
4. Any other comments you have related to the student-led discussion task.